

# Florence Newberry Gribble: Brethren Missionary Physician

An overview of the life of this remarkable Brethren missionary pioneer on the 50th anniversary of her death, by Julia Flora and Richard Winfield.

**FIFTY YEARS AGO**, on March 3, 1942, Brethren missionary physician Dr. Florence Newberry Gribble passed from this life. Though little known by Brethren today, her faithful service to her Master during more than 30 years in Africa has left us a rich legacy.

Her early life reads like a chapter from *Little House on the Prairie*. Florence Alma Newberry was born December 3, 1879, in Louisville, Nebraska, the daughter of Joseph and Saphronia Newberry. When she was nine, her family moved by covered wagon to Kit Carson County, Colorado. There they built and lived in a sod house.

When Florence was 12, her parents sent her to live with her aunt and grandmother in La Moille, Illinois. There she continued her schooling, which she had begun in Colorado. At the age of 16 she graduated from high school, at the top of her class.

## Steps to conversion

Florence had not been born into a Christian home. Her father, a lawyer, was a skeptic who taught his children that Jesus Christ was a myth and that belief in Him was to be strictly avoided. Her mother, though having "an inner longing that her children might know and love the One in Whom she intellectually believed," was also not a Christian.

During her early years, Florence attended various church services and



*James and Florence Gribble,  
shortly after their wedding in 1913.*

Reproduced from *Stranger Than Fiction*, © Foreign Missionary Society of the Grace Brethren Church; used by permission.

revival meetings and was on the brink of salvation several times. But it was not until she was 19 that she became a Christian. While scrubbing the kitchen floor, she was pondering Acts 16:31. Finally the truth of that passage came home to her, and she turned her life over to Jesus Christ. That same day she led both her mother, who was now living in La Moille, and one of her sisters to saving faith in Christ.

## A clear call to mission service

During the summer following her conversion, Florence attended a Student Volunteer Convention in Rockford, Ill. There she offered her life anew to the Lord and promised to go wherever He might send her.

Sometime later she began having a vision. She saw black people falling over a high cliff, crying, "Come! Come and help us!" Night after night the vision was repeated, until she sought the Lord to know its meaning.

The meaning soon became clear to her. The black people were Africans. They were in need of both spiritual and physical help. And God was calling her to Africa as a medical missionary.

## Off to medical school

She immediately made plans to give up teaching school, which she had been doing since she was 17, and she applied to a medical school in Chicago. She was accepted at the Chicago Homeopathic College, later to become part of Hahnemann Medical College. She was one of the first three women admitted to the school. Though the three were given a hard time at first by the men students, who did not think it appropriate for women to study medicine, they eventually gained acceptance.

Florence did quite well in her studies. Finances, however, were a problem. During the first summer break, she worked for a time as a private nurse and in a hospital. Then she got what she thought was to be a temporary job as a nurse at a Foundlings' Home. She ended up working there three years, not just during the summer months, but part time during the school year as well. Thus she not only earned the money she needed to pay for her medical training, but she also gained "experience which was to be a marvelous aid to her future work on the mission field."

Following graduation from medical college in 1906, Dr. Newberry, as she had now become, practiced medicine in Chicago for two years to gain experience. She worked particularly with women and among the poor. Keeping in mind her call to missions, she also took a term of study at Moody Bible Institute. There she learned about the Africa

*Mrs. Flora is a member of the Ashland Park Street Brethren Church and works as a librarian at Ashland Theological Seminary.*

*Mr. Winfield is editor of the EVANGELIST.*

Inland Mission, which sent missionaries to British East Africa (Kenya). She applied and was accepted.

On Saturday, October 31, 1908, she and several other missionaries set sail for Africa. Among the others was a Brethren missionary named James Gribble, who, like Florence, was making his first trip to Africa. The two had met in New York just a day or two earlier, and James had fallen "desperately, hopelessly in love" with Florence. The friendship which developed between them was a happy part of the sea voyage. The terrible sea sickness Florence experienced was the negative side.

### First term of mission service

In Kenya, Florence served for approximately three and one-half years at the Kijabe mission station among the Kikuyu people. In addition to operating a dispensary at the station, she visited the surrounding villages, tending the sick in their homes and the dying in the jungle. The superstition of the tribe forbade that anyone should die in a hut, so the sick were taken into the jungle when death seemed imminent. She often walked as many as 15 miles a day ministering to those in need.

James Gribble was in charge of the "industrial" work at Kijabe, which included among other tasks operating a sawmill and doing surveying. His love for Florence continued, and in time he proposed to her, much to her surprise! She rejected the proposal.

In April 1912 Florence was sent as part of a pioneer party to a new mission station in the Belgian Congo (now Zaire). This did not go well. They were delayed in reaching their destination by war, were forced to live in temporary quarters, did not have adequate help, and soon succumbed to malaria.

#### Transportation Problems

Because of the distances she needed to travel while at Kijabe station, Florence procured a mule to ride. She named the mule Theodore Roosevelt and called him "Teddy" for short — in honor of the ex-president, who visited the Kijabe station. But because "Teddy" was a treacherous beast prone to throw his rider, he was soon replaced by a gentler mule named Koli. Koli's only fault was that she was hard to catch when needed.

James had not gone with the party, for his services were still needed at Kijabe. After six months, however, he was able to join Florence and the others in the Belgian Congo. He was soon instrumental in moving the group to a more hospitable location.

James soon renewed his overtures to Florence, which she continued to resist. In time, however, the Lord changed her heart, and in early January of 1913 they became engaged. On August 12 of that same year they were married at the mission station.

Some time later the two of them made an evangelistic trip to the remote areas of the region, during which Florence became seriously ill. With great difficulty her young husband was able to get her to a mission hospital at Kampala in Uganda. There she underwent two separate surgeries and a three-month period of recovery.

When the time for their departure came, the doctor took James aside and said, "Young man, take your wife home, and never presume to bring her to the tropics again." It was the first of many times that Florence was advised by various physicians to give up the work on the mission field.

In this case, at least, they did obey the doctor's orders to the extent that they started for the United States on furlough. They arrived home in January of 1915, after an absence of more than six years. During this furlough, their first and only child, Marguerite, was born — on October 29, 1915, at Hahnemann Hospital, where Florence had graduated nine years earlier.

#### A new mission field

During James Gribble's service in Kenya and the Belgian Congo, he had become burdened for the unevangelized peoples in central Africa. His marriage to Florence had strengthened that call. Through regular correspondence with Dr. Louis S. Bauman, secretary of the Foreign Missionary Society of the Brethren Church, he was successful in gaining support for such a venture.

At the 1914 General Conference the Foreign Missionary Society had presented a resolution asking for the approval of Africa as a field for missionary endeavor and for approval of the Gribbles as missionaries to

the African field. The resolution was passed.

Thus when the Gribbles would return to Africa, they would go as missionaries of The Brethren Church, not with the Africa Inland Mission. And they would return not to the Belgian Congo, but to an area of French Equatorial Africa known as the Oubangui-Chari region (later to become the Central African Republic).

But their departure for this new mission field was delayed. Because of the need to mold a spirit of mission-mindedness throughout the church as well as the fact that World

(continued on page 9)

#### A Woman of Faith

Florence Newberry Gribble was a woman of great faith who took her needs to the Lord and trusted Him to provide. In her autobiography, *Stranger Than Fiction*, subtitled *A Partial Record of Answered Prayer in the Life of Dr. Florence N. Gribble*, she recorded numerous examples of the Lord's provision. Here are but two of them:

On the Friday before she was to take the final examinations at medical school, Florence still owed \$13 in tuition (a sizable sum in 1906!). No student could take the exams whose tuition was unpaid. She made this a matter of prayer, but told no one else of her need. That evening her aunt and uncle visited her, bringing a box of candy as an early graduation present. When they left, Florence discovered that the box also contained four five-dollar bills. Early Monday morning she hurried to the dean's office to pay the rest of her tuition before the exams, only to learn that a friend had come in the previous week and had paid the balance due.

Two years later, as she prepared to sail to Africa for her first term of mission service, she traveled to New York (the port of departure) without enough money to pay her fare. (Africa Inland Mission was a faith mission, meaning that missionaries were responsible for raising their own support.) In New York, she went to a service of the Africa Inland Mission in Brooklyn, at which she spoke briefly (but did not reveal her need). At the close of the service, a stranger handed her an envelope, saying that he felt led to give it to her. When she opened the envelope, she discovered that it contained just enough money to cover the balance she needed to pay her way to her mission station.

## Florence Gribble

(continued from page 7)

War I was in progress, it was three years before the Gribbles could return to Africa. During this time, at the Ohio District Conference of 1917, Florence was ordained.

Finally, on January 8, 1918, this little family and two single missionary women set sail for the new mission field. Perhaps this delay was intended to teach them patience for that which lay ahead; after reaching Africa, they had to wait two more years before they were given permission by the French government to enter Oubangui-Chari.

### Using their time wisely

Their time of waiting, however, was not spent in idleness. They spent it learning the language, preaching in the villages of the area where they were waiting, and in evangelism.

While they were at a place called Carnot, the government official there loaned the women missionaries his horses, so that they could get some exercise. They did exercise, but they also used the horses on their preaching missions to carry them to far more distant villages than they could reach on foot.

When the official learned what was going on, he reprimanded the women for using the horses for other than his intended purpose. He told them they could continue to keep the horses if they would simply desist from preaching. The horses were returned at once!

During this period of waiting, Florence again became ill. Due to her illness, the need to return Mar-

guerite to the U.S. so that she could be placed in a school, and the desire to recruit more missionaries for the work in Africa, the Gribbles decided that Florence and Marguerite should return to the U.S. Little did they know when they departed that it would be the last time Marguerite would see her father.

During the voyage home and the early weeks in the U.S., Florence's health improved. She then proceeded to make arrangements for Marguerite. She was put in the care of Mr. and Mrs. John Weed of Sunnyside, Washington. She would live with them for most of the remainder of her childhood years, only seeing her mother during her furloughs.

Having accomplished two of her objectives, regaining her health and providing for Marguerite and her schooling, Florence now set about fulfilling the third goal of her furlough — recruiting missionaries to help in the African work. As a result of her appeals throughout the church, many responded, of whom six ultimately made it to the field.

### Return to Africa

Her purposes accomplished, Florence again set sail for Africa — on September 14, 1922, one year to the day from the date of her departure from the mission field. She reached the African coast on November 21, and on December 21 was reunited with her husband. During her time of absence, he had finally been able to enter Oubangui-Chari and had established the beginnings of a mission station at a place called Bassai. Florence now joined him in the work there.

The couple's time together, however, was to be short. During the time of their separation, James' health had gradually deteriorated. Shortly after Florence's return, he learned that additional missionaries would soon be coming, and he redoubled his efforts at building. This work was too much for his frail strength, and in his weakened condition, he succumbed to "black-water fever." On June 4, 1923, he died.

### Final years of service

Following her husband's death, Florence stayed in Africa to continue the work, along with other missionaries who were arriving on the field. She continued her medical work, and also served as a teacher. In time, she was able to open a clinic for lepers. Except for furloughs (during which she was able to spend some time with Marguerite), she remained in Africa for the rest of her life.

In 1941 Marguerite and her husband, Harold Dunning, joined Marguerite's mother as missionaries in Africa. Later that year, Florence witnessed the birth of her first grandchild, Marguerite Ruth Dunning.

The following year, however, Florence's health began to fail, and on March 3, 1942, she died of fever. She was buried in the land of her calling, beside her husband, at the Bassai mission station. [†]

As a result of the efforts of numerous missionaries and national workers, the church the Gribbles helped to begin now has approximately 600 local congregations and more than 145,000 members. At the time of the division in 1939–40, mission work in the Central African Republic went with the Grace Brethren Church.